

Report

Sitka National Historic Park

■ 1.0 Site Description

The Sitka National Historic Park (NHP), encompassing 107 acres, was established in 1907 and commemorates the Battle of Sitka of 1804 between the Russians and the American Natives. The Park is located on Baranof Island in Alaska's Southeastern Panhandle. The island can be reached only by commercial airline or by cruise ships and ferries. The Park is located approximately one-quarter mile from the center of the town of Sitka and is accessible via foot, bike, private car or private tour bus. No public transit system is provided on the island.

The Park is popular for two main reasons: its physical beauty and its abundance of historical culture. The Park is a temperate rain forest and includes several scenic coastal trails. Annual rainfall is approximately 100 inches per year. Sitka has seven nationally significant historic sites, including the Russian Bishop's House and others that are indicative of the Russian culture. The Park also includes an extensive collection of totem poles and provides interpretation of the Tlingit native tribe culture through its partner, the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center.

The mission of the Park is to preserve and interpret the historically and culturally significant events, sites, and objects relating to the 1804 Battle of Sitka – the last major resistance of the Tlingit people to Russian colonialism; to conserve the natural resources and scenery of the Park; to provide an understanding of Tlingit and Southeast Alaska Indian culture and history and of czarist Russia's exploration and colonization of Alaska; and to provide for the enjoyment of these resources in a way that leaves them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

Annual visitation is 180,000 visitors per year. Peak months are June, July and August. Peak days are when the cruise ships are docked in the port – usually during the peak months.

The usual length of stay at the site varies for the type of visitor. The visitor base is composed of individual visitors, locals and cruise ship groups. Approximately 30 to 50 percent of all visitors are cruise ship patrons that access the Park via tour buses and have less than an hour to see the Park. Other visitors access the Park via personal cars or by foot.

Community development conditions, issues and concerns include the following:

- Sitka is a community of 8,500 that can increase to 13,000 for a day due to the cruise ship patrons. How can the Park continue to accommodate a large number of visitors while giving these people a quality experience?
- The number of visitors is projected to grow in the future, due to the increased number of cruise ship visitors. How will the Park and Sitka itself accommodate this growth?
- How can the Park provide a quality experience for cruise ship patrons, who are very short-term visitors?

The top transportation issues or problems as identified by site staff are:

- **Congestion** – The island itself has 15 miles of roadway and 70 tour buses. Circulating large numbers of people through the Park via cars and buses is increasingly difficult. Each cruise ship may have 1,000 people interested in touring the Park, and there may be two to four ships docked for approximately four hours simultaneously. Because of the short duration that the cruise ships are docked, Park tours for these visitors are often condensed into less than two hours. It is increasingly frequent that up to 500 visitors will stop at the same Park site and only have 30 to 45 minutes to spend at a site. This causes intense congestion during selected times. Also, many cruise visitors are elderly and are not able to walk longer distances.
- **Parking** – Within the Park, there are two small parking lots; the lower lot has 14 spaces and the upper lot has eight spaces. The upper lot is reserved for bus use during the summer visitor season and can accommodate eight buses at one time. The Park policy is to avoid the expansion of parking lots in order to preserve parkland. The Park has plans to reconfigure parking lots to improve safety, but not to increase capacity.
- **Conflict between Pedestrians and Vehicles** – During the busiest times, streets become overrun with pedestrians, and buses and cars have difficulty circulating. Pedestrian safety is also a related issue.
- **Accommodating Motor Homes** – More people are bringing their motor homes over to the island via ferry, but there is not enough space to park these vehicles in the Park.

Past plans for the Park include socioeconomic research for the General Management Plan (GMP) and the Gateway Community Plan for Sitka. These studies concluded that neither the Park nor Sitka itself can accommodate a large number of people. The GMP recommended instituting a shuttle service. In a survey of visitors conducted for the Park, 99 percent of the respondents indicated they were satisfied with the Park. The most frequently cited complaint by cruise patrons was the lack of time they had for their visit.

■ 2.0 Existing ATS

There is no existing Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) at the Sitka NHP.

■ 3.0 ATS Needs

- An ATS solution involving the community, the Park and tour operators may be warranted. This solution should focus on creating a more efficient and effective way to circulate visitors through the Park. It would likely include providing a combination of direct route service with shorter shuttle service that could operate by demand. The shuttle service could use smaller vans and could be operated by the private entities, preferably one of the two existing tour companies.
- A self-sufficient transit system would also be helpful for the community of Sitka and the Park. Currently no public transit exists, although limited van service is provided for the elderly.
- A shuttle operating between the cruise ships and the Park entrance, if not managed properly, may be more harmful than helpful. It would deliver a greater number of visitors to such sites as the visitor center during the same timeframe, which could tax the Park facilities even more than under today's conditions.

■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Space is limited in the Park. Patronage is very high during select times during peak visitation days. The challenges include:

- How to circulate large amounts of visitors throughout the park quickly and efficiently;
- How to reduce and minimize vehicular and pedestrian congestion at peak times; and
- How to improve safety between pedestrians and vehicles.

The potential ATS solution would likely include providing shuttle/van circulator service in addition to the existing tour buses. Improving pedestrian trails along roadways would also be helpful. Possible public transit could be provided through a consortium of the Park, the town of Sitka and private entities.

■ 5.0 Bibliography

Sitka National Historical Park. Internet site: <http://www.nps.gov/sitk/>. Information printed November 4, 1999.

Sitka: Gateway Community Planning Assistance & Design Workshop. Workshops conducted May and August 1996.

■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Gary D. Gauthier, Superintendent. Telephone Interview. November 15, 1999

Gary D. Gauthier, Superintendent. Telephone Interview. November 16, 1999